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THAMYRIS

TO-DAY AND TO-MORROW

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of the Book*

THAMYRIS
OR
IS THERE A FUTURE FOR POETRY?

BY
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**THE MEMORY OF
OSWALD SICKERT**

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OR

IS THERE A FUTURE FOR POETRY?

CHAPTER I

THE MUSES IN HEAVEN

THERE is an old Teutonic legend that every year, upon All Souls' Day, the archangel Raphael is sent down to the classical ward of Hell, where the dispossessed deities of heathendom are confined, with a summons for the nine Muses to appear and give a command performance before the throne of Jehovah and the assembled Host of Heaven. So the poor embarrassed

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ladies, ushered before that critical and unsympathetic audience, reluctantly tune their lyres, and begin some ancient Hellenic chant, some ode, it may be, that they had once sung in the feasting-hall of Olympus, or at the marriage of Cadmus and Harmonia. At first their strange pagan minstrelsy seems harsh and unpleasing to blessed ears, accustomed only to the angelical modes of "saintly shout and solemn jubilee"; but before long, in spite of themselves, the angels are touched and troubled by this disquieting music, burdened with all the passions and sighs of humanity, until at last celestial visages are stained with tears, and the sound of weeping is heard in Heaven.

But on one of these occasions, not so very long ago, after the Muses had come to the end of their program, several of the more literary archangels expressed a desire to hear some examples of post-classical poetry, of which they knew little or nothing. As the Muses

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could not gratify their curiosity, Satan, who, as in the *Book of Job*, was paying one of his rare visits to the court of Jehovah, stepped into the breach, and beguiled several hours with poetical specimens from different periods, which he had picked up during his ceaseless wanderings to and fro upon the earth. At first his audience was enchanted. He had an excellent ear and memory, and could reproduce perfectly the several styles of the troubadours and minnesingers, and of the various courtly or popular minstrels of the Middle Ages. But gradually a change came over his performance. The saints and angels grew puzzled and restless, as the element of song, and even of intonation, progressively disappeared, until at last they found themselves listening with pain and indignation to mere naked, spoken verse. And what verse? Rime they were familiar with in their hymns, and liked. But soon even rime began to fade, and threatened to

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vanish altogether. Metre too dissolved and degenerated from all regular recognisable form ; and when finally Satan jerked out the latest jewel of American *vers libre*, he was greeted, as once before in Hell, with a dismal universal hiss, the sign of public scorn. The Muses had long ago fled down horror-stricken to Hades ; and Satan, who always dislikes unpopularity, smiled, bowed, and retired. The choirmaster, Gabriel, tapped the desk with his baton, and a moment later the Heavenly Host was purging its offended ears with the strains of a noble Gregorian chant.

Now what lesson, if any, may we draw from this apologue ? Were the angels right, or wrong, or perhaps neither ? Has the history of poetry been merely a deplorable tale of decadence, a progressive impoverishment and deterioration, through senility and second-childishness, towards an unlamented death in a bastard and

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graceless prose? Or on the contrary has the gradual divorce of poetry from music and intoning meant its liberation for subtler and more rational, but no less truly poetic purposes? Before attempting to answer such questions, let us first look at the historical facts.

Homer, the fountain-head of Hellenic, and so of European poetry, though originally sung to the accompaniment of a lyre, was in later times intoned by professional rhapsodists, much as most Oriental poetry is intoned to this day. Greek lyrical poetry was of course always sung, whether chorally or by soloists. The dialogue of Greek plays was not sung, but was probably intoned, or at least declaimed in a highly conventional and rhythmical manner, which was perhaps not so very unlike the still-surviving tradition of the Japanese Nō play-actors. It is uncertain whether Horace intended his *Odes* to be read, or to be sung to the lyre: but Lucretius and Virgil un-

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doubtedly wrote their poems to be read. Virgil indeed gave public readings of his *Eclogues*. Probably, could we hear gramophone records of his performances, we should say that he was intoning rather than reading. However that may be, his example set a fashion that was disastrous for Latin poetry. His successors wrote more and more with a view to declamation, not in the noble Homeric manner, but in a style that was both bombastic and amateurish ; and so poetry soon degenerated into stale rhetoric and boredom.

When after the lapse of centuries poetry emerged again, rejuvenated, its infant energies were still schooled by the same two mistresses, music and intonation. The art of the rhapsodists of the *Chanson de gestes* may have been ruder than that of the Homeridae, but its æsthetic character and its social function were much the same. And for centuries the medieval lyric was in-

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tended to be sung, not read. But with the multiplication of books the inevitable change began to operate, and the medium of poetry came more and more to be verse spoken and read, rather than performed.

The poetical drama of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was, from a historical point of view, no more than a brief and glorious episode. The declamation of dramatic verse may well have been a great art on the English, French and Spanish stage ; but, if so, it has not survived into our own time, and shows little sign of resurrection. The development of polyphonic and instrumental music, while it has made modern opera and the *Lieder* of Schubert and Brahms possible, seems to have destroyed all hope of an equal marriage between music and lyrical poetry. Modern polyphony is a great art, but a tyrannous ; and though a beautiful poem may still inspire a beautiful setting, the medium of the

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resulting work of art will be musical, and not poetic. Verse no doubt can still be declaimed, whether on the stage or elsewhere ; but actors have generally neither taste nor tradition ; the poets themselves have seldom enough skill or training to be effective ; and professional reciters are “ abominable, unutterable, and worse.” Thus it would seem that all the avenues which might lead to the public performance of poetry are blocked. There are either no roads at all, or those that exist are in the possession of road-hogs. Is this state of things a disaster or no ? And if it be a disaster, are there any remedies to be found ?

It is no doubt possible that so summary a diagnosis may be quite misleading. Chaucer, it might be objected, already wrote for readers ; and so did Milton. Yet many of us find them, and some of their successors, still quite readable. Surely then great poetry can still be both produced and

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enjoyed, even when it is completely divorced from music or intonation. All this may be true. Yet it is well to remember that Chaucer was the immediate successor on the one hand of the English and French minstrels, and on the other of Dante and Boccaccio, whose art in its turn grew directly out of that of the troubadours and the Italian minstrels. And who have been the inheritors of Chaucer's art? Spenser, let us say, and in our time William Morris. Is it not possible that both Chaucer and Dante were peculiarly fortunate, in that their art had only quite recently emerged from the discipline of a more primitive musical stage? Their successors may be said to have deteriorated, the more purely literary they became, and the further removed from the Pierian fountain-head of minstrelsy. Then again Milton, though more than any other English poet he was consciously the heir to all the ages, inherited his medium

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and his metrical technique directly from Shakespeare's verse that was written, not for reading, but for dramatic performance, although no doubt Milton modified it considerably for his own undramatic purposes. As to the inheritors of Milton's art, such as Wordsworth and Keats, Matthew Arnold and Mr. Bridges, considerable as have been their achievements, are there not some signs, even in their own work, and still more in the tendency of recent experiments, of an impulse to break away from Miltonic and Shakespearian usage, as though the medium of blank verse could no longer be profitably explored, not at least in its old traditional form?

Nevertheless it might plausibly be maintained that although the poets of the future are not likely to repeat the particular successes of Chaucer and Milton and their school, there is no reason why they should not exploit the medium of spoken verse in quite new

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ways, just as successfully as did their predecessors. First however it would be as well to become somewhat clearer as to the nature of this medium of spoken and silently read verse, and how it differs from more primitive poetry.

CHAPTER II

THE MEDIUM OF SPOKEN VERSE

WHEN we read Homer or Aeschylus to ourselves, we do not as a rule attempt to imagine what their poems must have sounded like, when they were recited or sung. We transpose them, as it were, into a medium more or less resembling that of modern poetry. Let us try to measure what our loss must be, and what, if any, the compensations. To begin with, the elements of music and intonation, and also, in drama, of acting and dancing, have disappeared altogether. The intensity and mass of our emotions cannot possibly be the same as they would have been, could we have heard and beheld the living reality of which the text is but a pale,

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colourless shadow. It is true that rhythm is still there, and the general proportions of the whole : but rhythm and movement, unembodied and uninterpreted by performers, are far more difficult for us to realise by the less sensuous, more purely mental process of reading ; while in the absence of musical and histrionic contrasts and emphasis, even the general proportions are likely to be somewhat obscured. It is as though we were studying a photograph or a monochrome copy of a painted picture ; or rather we might be said to experience the same kind of difficulties as when we are contemplating colourless fragments of Greek sculpture against the background of a museum wall, at a distance and in a light that were never intended for them by their creators. How different would be our emotions, could we see the figures of the Olympian or Parthenon pediments placed in their right relation to the architecture and to the landscape,

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unmutilated, and glowing with colour which harmonised with that of the temples of which they were an organic part ! It is a poor compensation that by long loving study we may perhaps become more intimate with the indestructible beauty of certain details, than we could ever have been, had we seen them less closely as elements of a complex work of art.

In some ways our plight with regard to ancient poetry is less unhappy. Many of our texts are unmutilated, and when we read the *Oedipus* to ourselves, it should seem to us as much an organic unity as *Othello*. There may also be a real gain in our sensitiveness to the more purely literary qualities, such as verbal, as distinguished from musical colour, the suggestive values of words and combinations of words, their overtones, and the complicated reverberations they evoke in our minds. As none of the work is being done for us by performers, our imagination, thrown

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back on its own unaided resources, should be all the more wide awake and active. A line drawing is often a more effective stimulus to the mind than a painting, an unaccompanied violin sonata than an orchestral symphony ; and in the same way poetry, when merely read to ourselves, though it cannot so imperiously dominate our physical senses, may well make a subtler and profounder appeal to the intellectual imagination.

All that has been said with regard to the reading of poetry that was intended to be sung or chanted, should be even more true of modern verse that has been written solely in order to be spoken or read. Such poetry is in fact composed in quite a different medium to the poetry of Homer and Aeschylus ; and I must now try to make it clear what this medium seems to me to consist of. In order to do so, I must venture upon a brief excursion over the perilous quicksands of metrical theory. To save

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time I shall speak dogmatically, while well aware that none of my assertions can at best do more than express a part of the truth.

When we read aloud a leading article, or any other piece of utilitarian and unemotional prose, we are not as a rule in the least aware of the rhythm of the sentences. But suppose we were to read the same leading article with a simulated mock-heroic emotion, we should then find, if we cared to observe, that we were now emphasising the before latent rhythm in two ways: we should be stressing certain syllables with greater force; and at the same time we should be making the intervals between these stressed syllables, not indeed rigidly equal, but far more nearly equal than they were, when we read the passage with the lack of emotion which it merited. And we shall find that the same thing happens whenever we read prose that genuinely moves us. Emotion in fact always

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tends to regularise and emphasise rhythm, even in prose. Now the main function of verse is deliberately, by its structure, to regularise rhythm, and so to create emotion artificially. Let us take a normal English verse: "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day." The five stressed syllables, *cur-*, *tolls*, *knell*, *par-*, *day*, are felt to be equidistant in time. No doubt they are in fact only approximately equidistant. The human voice is not an instrument like a piano or a violin, by means of which we can divide time into mathematically equal spaces. However, the normal bars, or feet, are *felt* to be equal in time; and that is sufficient. The rhythmically indeterminate words and phrases of everyday speech are forced into this mould, or rather stretched upon this framework; and that process is a continuous series of Procrustean operations, of slight lengthenings or contractions, and imperceptible changes of stress and emphasis. Almost the

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most important difference between good and bad verse is that in good verse this process of moulding and stretching words increases their emotional expressiveness, whereas in bad verse it does not. Of course the versification of a good poem is never continuously regular. Accents are dropped or displaced; unstressed syllables are left out, or extra syllables inserted. But we are, or should be, always conscious of the underlying pattern, the ideal rhythmical base.

Such metrical irregularities are necessary not merely in order to prevent monotony: for any writer who knows his business they are a powerful instrument for controlling and modifying the emotional values of language. In Milton's line,

Transfix us to the bottom of this gulf,

there are only three stressed syllables. If these words were to occur in a news-

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paper article we should probably read them so rapidly that they would not sound like a blank verse at all. In order that they may become a verse, we must either put artificial stresses upon *to* and *of*, and read, "Trans- | fíx us | tó the | bóttom | óf this | gúl f," which, though formally a blank verse, is not English; or else we must linger upon certain syllables, and stretch them out sufficiently to compensate for the absent stresses: "Trans- | fíx us | to the | bóttom | of this | gúl f." What happens here is something of the same nature as syncopation in music. The two pairs of syllables, *-fix us* and *bottom*, are each dwelt upon and prolonged, so that they expand and bulge over from their own bars into the bars that follow them, and so push away the unemphatic syllables *to* and *of* from the positions at the beginning of the bar, where a stress would normally occur. We are in fact compelled, if the line is to make metrical

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sense, to read the words slowly and spaciouſly, which produces the rhetorical and emotional effect that Milton intended. The following lines from Milton are instances of the opposite process of forcing into the rhythmical mould words which in ordinary prose ſpeech would claim more elbow-room than the metre allows them :

O'er many a frozen, many a fiery alp,
Rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens, and ſhades
of death.

The natural way of ſpacing theſe words, if they were prose, would be :
' Rócks, | cáves, | lákes, | féns,
bógs, | déns, and | shádes of
déath." But the metrical framework compels us to crowd theſe monosyllables together, and read them twice as rapidly as we ſhould in prose. This hurry and conſtipation produces an effect of effort and ſtrain, which is juſt what is required. An extreme caſe of

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this power of metre to mould and so give life to a phrase, is the line,

And made him bow to the gods of his wives.

If this be read as a line with four stresses, thus: "And | máde him | bów to the | góds of his | wíves," it is then not a Miltonic blank verse at all. Yet, since we cannot read it, "And | máde him | bów tó | thé góds | óf his | wíves," the only thing to be done is to put a kind of level staccato accent on the last six syllables, thus: "And máde him bów tó thé góds óf hís wíves," which spaces the words out, so that they sound like a blank verse, or at least do the best they can to sound like one. Thus not only is our ear sufficiently reminded of the underlying metrical base, but we are obliged to give to the phrase a kind of fierce indignant or ironic emphasis, which again is, I think, exactly what Milton intended. I could multiply instances ;

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but these should be sufficient to illustrate the way in which verse, if it be well written, adds imaginative expressiveness to words, by forcing us to space them out and emphasise them, till they acquire new values that they would not have had in prose.

Another obvious function of a constant metrical framework is that of heightening the values of words and phrases by mere position, much as the structure of a cathedral may do with sculpture. Any passage of Milton, or of Keats' mature work, might be used to illustrate this principle.

If then the main function of spoken verse be this of building a framework upon which we may place words in significant and beautiful relations both with each other and with the rhythmical structure itself, and upon which we may also stretch out and contract them, in order to increase their emotional values, it would seem to be necessary that this framework should

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be definite and constant. And it is this necessity that is, I think, the chief objection to some modern experiments in free verse. Whatever advantages there may be in emancipation from regularity, we should not forget the price that has to be paid for it in the loss or diminution of this power of moulding and vivifying language. It is true that there have been many successful experiments in more or less free verse, from the choruses in *Samson Agonistes* to, let us say, Mr. Waley's translations of early Chinese poetry; but I suggest that as a general rule the success is in proportion to the degree in which we are made aware of a fixed metrical base underlying the irregularities. But what are we to think of this kind of thing?

Come, my songs, let us express our baser passions.
Let us express our envy for the man with a
steady job and no worry about the future.

Have these words, by being divided

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into two lines, acquired any kind of value they would not have had if they had been printed as prose, in which case they might be enjoyed as an amusing satirical outburst? But it would almost seem that at times free verse is no more than an excuse for uttering futilities and ineptitudes that we should not have dared to express in honest prose.

There is yet another important aspect of this medium of modern verse which we must not forget. Ancient poetry was in an obvious and literal sense an incantation, at once charming and exciting the mind through the ear. Now modern poetry, though no longer chanted but spoken, still retains, or should retain, something of its primitive nature as an incantation. It is notorious that poets, when reading verse, generally fall into a kind of chanting delivery, which sometimes, owing to their lack of skill, may seem affected, and even absurd. But their

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instinct is none the less right. Poetry read to sound like prose is intolerable. Thought is not poetic unless it be kindled into emotion ; and the natural language of emotion is different from that of prose, the vehicle of reason. Not only is it more rhythmical, but it is more musical ; that is to say, though the pitch is not deliberately regulated, as in song, there is a tendency to a level monotonous intonation, and changes of pitch, when they occur, are more conscious and more noticeable. The commonest fault of bad speakers of verse on the stage is to emphasise individual words by raising the pitch, so destroying the music that is proper to verse, and incidentally the rhythm too.

And here I may mention a danger to which both writers and readers of modern verse are very liable. In order to get the full value out of poetry (or indeed out of prose too), we ought, as Flaubert insisted, to read it aloud.

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But as we cannot always be doing that, we must, when reading silently to ourselves, listen with our unsensual ear to the same sounds and the same rhythms, moving at the same pace, as though we were reading aloud. Otherwise we shall not be reading poetry. It is indeed quite possible that twenty lines of Milton, read silently thus, may actually take up somewhat less time than they would if they were read aloud; but the pace ought not to *seem* hurried: in so far as it does, the magic of the medium will be impaired or destroyed. Moreover poets themselves, when, as they often do, they write more for the eye and for the mind than for the ear, are not writing literature at all, let alone poetry.

CHAPTER III

THE EVOLUTION OF TECHNIQUE

I HAVE now made it as clear as I am able what I believe the medium of modern spoken verse to be ; and I have tried to indicate some of the dangers that lie in wait both for poets and their readers. The best safeguard is that we should fully realise both what the medium is and what it is not. All art consists in exploiting the possibilities and limitations of a medium ; and any art of which the medium is misunderstood, and so misused, is likely to degenerate into gracelessness or triviality, and perish as it deserves.

Now that poetry is generally no longer performed, but read, it is obvious that its nature has to a certain extent grown more like that of prose,

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and that there has been a corresponding increase both in subtlety of expression, and in the possible range of material. Let us take full advantage of this change : but let us also remember that "everything is what it is, and not another thing"; that poetry still is, and always must be, a different art from prose ; and that so long as it retains its integrity, it will have its own proper subject-matter, which though it may sometimes resemble, will never be the same as that of any other art.

Let us also honestly admit the truth that poetry has ceased to be a great popular and social art. It is no longer possible for it to be publicly recited or performed in any way. When it ventures upon the stage, it becomes a cause either of boredom or of laughter, unless it be travestied until it is unrecognisable. When associated with music, it is absorbed in the more dominating medium. It is of course possible, though unlikely, that music will evolve in the

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direction of greater simplicity ; or that some few musicians may grow sufficiently interested in poetry to devise a special kind of music, so tenuous and transparent that poetry will be able to live and breathe through it. It is also conceivable that, although the public of the commercial theatre will not tolerate poetry on the stage, satisfactory amateur productions of verse plays may become more common. I have never heard verse spoken on the stage more beautifully than by Ulysses and Agamemnon in the Cambridge Marlowe Society's *Troilus*. If such successes were to become more frequent, we might hope in time to establish a tradition for performing verse plays, and to create a fit audience for them, which would encourage poets to take poetical drama seriously. But if that is to happen, then modern experiments will have to be risked, and produced as carefully and as frequently as classical revivals are now.

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But though in this direction we may see a kind of dawning hope for poetical drama, yet I fear it is no more than a dubious glimmering. Poetry will still have to be written in the main for readers. And if poets are to continue to find readers, in spite of the growing competition of the more popular arts of music, the prose drama, the cinema, and the novel, they will have, I fancy, to take thought how they may put away childish things, and become, not perhaps more serious, but more rational, more daring, in fact more interesting. The material for poetry is the whole realm of the sensuous and intellectual imagination, and that is infinite. At present poets seem to be somewhat timid and unenterprising explorers. And I would suggest that experiments and innovations in technique are likely to be the most hopeful means of extending the range of expression and of discovering new material. In every art changes and developments of the

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medium require and call forth the invention of appropriate subject matter; and the greatest art has always been produced where inspiration has been refreshed and quickened by technical changes, which have made possible the exploitation of unfamiliar themes. It would be rash to foretell with any confidence the directions in which poetical technique will develop in the future. The poets themselves will go their own ways, for better or for worse. But I may perhaps venture to indicate what seem to me the most natural and profitable lines of development.

Whatever may be our theory as to the true æsthetic and emotional function of metre, the conscious governing principle, according to which English verse has been written from the time of Chaucer until recent years, has been that of syllable-counting. Wherever a decasyllabic line contained more than ten syllables, elision, or the fiction of

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elision, was assumed as the explanation. Milton indeed formulated for himself certain definite rules, which he observed with great strictness, at least in *Paradise Lost*. But already in Shakespeare we may perceive a tendency to determine rhythm by stress rather than by the number of syllables ; and during the last hundred years we find stress becoming more and more the dominant principle of English prosody. When Mr. Abercrombie writes :

And I will show
This mask the devil wears, this old shipman,
A thing to make his proud heart of evil
Writhe like a trodden snake ;

or when Mr. Bottomley writes :

Have I broken the bird's wings to catch the bird ?
Have I shattered the door of her mind to enter
there ?

they are following the same principle
that allowed Shakespeare to say :

Dearly my delicate Ariel. Let us approach . . .

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or again :

Is goads, thorns, nettles, tails of wasps.

They have in fact adopted an entirely different metrical system not only from Milton's, but from such poets as Donne, who when he wrote :

Blasted with sighs, and surrounded with tears,

did so in the confidence that his readers would be instinctively conscious of the number of the syllables, and so would not be disconcerted by the irregular disposition of the stresses.

These two systems of syllabic and stress prosody, though descended from the same parent, the rhymed couplet of Chaucer, have now grown to be very different from each other. I would suggest that, just as stress prosody had its origin in Shakespeare's need for increased energy and emphasis in verse that was intended to be declaimed on the stage, so it may still be found to be

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whatever may be the number of feet to the line) may be said to be in duple time. But there is another rhythmical variety, which is sometimes not easy to distinguish from duple time, yet is essentially different.

And mony was the feather bed
That flatter'd on the faem ;
And mony was the gude lord's son
That never mair came hame.

This seven-stressed couplet, in which so many of our ballads are written, may be said to be in common time. The first, third, fifth and seventh stresses are generally stronger than the three intervening stresses, thus producing a kind of rhythmical undulation, which gives the line swiftness and lightness. The Elizabethans used this metre frequently in the form of rimed couplets. Chapman's translation of the *Iliad*, for example, is written in it. Blake in his prophetic books was the first, so far as I know, to dispense with

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rime, and to give the line variety by frequently changing the position of the cæsura, which normally follows the fourth stress. The following lines are from the *Book of Thel*.

The daughters of the Seraphim led round their
sunny flocks—
All but the youngest : she in paleness sought the
secret air,
To fade away like morning beauty from her
mortal day.
Down by the river of Adona her soft voice is
heard,
And thus her gentle lamentation falls like
morning dew :—
“ O life of this our spring ! why fades the lotus
of the water ?
Why fade these children of the spring, born but
to smile and fall ?
Ah ! Thel is like a watery bow, and like a parting
cloud ;
Like a reflection in a glass ; like shadows in the
water ;
Like dreams of infants, like a smile upon an
infant's face ;
Like the dove's voice ; like transient day ; like
music in the air.”

Shelley uses this metre lyrically in two of his most beautiful poems, taking the liberty of omitting the minor even

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stresses, and the light syllables that precede them, whenever it suits his purpose.

Away ! The móor is dárk beneath the moón.
Rápid clouds have drúnk the lást pale beams
of éven :
Away ! the gathering winds will cáll the
darkness sóon,
And profóundest midnight shróud the seréne
lights of héaven.

He concludes with the completely filled-out structure :

Thy remémbrance, and repéntance, and deep
músings are not frée
From the músic of two vóices and the líght of
one sweet smíle.

The lines in his *Prometheus* beginning :

Ah Síster, Desolátion is a délicate thíng,

are also written in this metre, which moreover is sufficiently Protean to form the basis of several of Gilbert's most attractive songs, such as, " If

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you're anxious for to shine in the high æsthetic line as a man of culture rare." There is no reason why this metre should not be developed into a very expressive and subtle instrument, especially if Blake's experiment be taken as a starting point. Though it may not have the grandeur of Milton's blank verse, it has more rapidity and lightness, and is not without a beauty and dignity of its own.

Triple time was seldom employed by the Elizabethans, except in lyrics such as Shakespeare's :

Merrily, merrily shall I live now
Under the blossom that hangs on the bough.

The eighteenth century found it an effective comedic rhythm, as in Goldsmith's :

When they talked of their Raphaels, Correggios
and stuff,
He shifted his trumpet and only took snuff.

But it was Shelley who first successfully

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slowed down triple time, and gave it dignity and variety, as in his *Sensitive Plant*:

And the jessamine faint, and the sweet tuberoses,
The sweetest flower for scent that blows ;
And all rare blossoms from every clime
Grew in that garden in perfect prime.

This rhythm has now become, in various forms and disguises, one of our commonest lyrical metres, easily modulating into duple time, and adaptable to lines of various lengths.

There is also another slower triple time, quite different to the usual form. Byron used it, probably without knowing what he was doing, in several of his lyrics, such as the Song of the Third Spirit in *Manfred*, and "There be none of Beauty's daughters": but the only instance I know where it has been consciously and deliberately used, is Professor Murray's translation of an *Ionic a minore* ode in the *Hippolytus*:

Could I take me to some cavern for mine hiding,
In the hill-tops where the Sun scarce hath trod.

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It is unlikely that this difficult rhythm will ever become common ; but in lyric poetry, by way of occasional contrast, very beautiful effects might well be obtained by it.

So far as I can see, these four are the only fundamental rhythms in English poetry. Their true nature, their various disguises, and their difference and relationship with one another, are not always sufficiently understood, and the result has frequently been confused and clumsy workmanship, and a failure to exploit their latent possibilities to the full.

There is one further aspect of the poetic craft which I must now mention. The Greek lyrical poets, whose metre was quantitative, and was emphasised by music and dancing movements, were able to build up far more elaborately organised rhythmical structures than we are accustomed to, with our simpler lyrical forms. Structure, with us, is generally delineated and emphasised by

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rime, rather than by internal variations and contrasts of rhythm. Even in the unrimed choruses of *Samson Agonistes* the rhythm is far more uniform than in the simplest Greek lyrical poems. I do not suggest that it would be possible or desirable artificially to change the nature of English poetical rhythm from an accental to a quantitative basis, as Ennius did with Latin prosody. But although no doubt purely quantitative English verse will always remain somewhat of an exotic curiosity, I feel sure that if more conscious attention were paid to the quantity of English syllables, not only would our normal verse-forms, such as blank verse, gain in subtlety and expressive force, but all sorts of new possibilities of lyrical structure could be discovered and explored. Rime need not necessarily be dispensed with ; but it would no longer be the only effective instrument for binding together a complicated lyrical stanza. Stress

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would still indicate and govern internal rhythm ; but careful attention to the length and shortness of syllables would make it possible to build up far more elaborate and varied metrical structures than have hitherto been attempted. The result might be a verse that was genuinely free, yet did not degenerate into prose, based upon irregular but easily comprehensible metrical patterns, that could mould and dominate language as effectively as the older, more rigid verse-forms.

CHAPTER IV

POETIC MATERIAL

DIFFICULT as it must be to foresee the evolution of technical methods, it would be still more hazardous to attempt any prediction as to the new subject-matter which poets will have to discover, if their art is to continue as a living growth. The mind of even the most detached artist is a part of the world into which he was born, and his matter must to a large extent be a reflection of his environment. But the material and spiritual world changes far more swiftly than the language and the rhythmical artifices which constitute the poetic medium. And so, although I have suggested elsewhere that technique is the mistress of invention,

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and that changes in the medium make possible the discovery of new themes, yet an opposite theory might as easily be maintained, with perhaps equal truth, that social and intellectual changes create demands, in satisfying which an intelligent artist will find his most genial inspiration, and will modify his technique until it becomes a fit instrument for expressing his new material. But though for these reasons it would be unwise to indulge in prophecy, we may at least take a survey of the main possibilities.

To begin with, the innumerable and infinite output of personal lyrics, good, bad and indifferent, is certain to continue, so long as human beings are subject to passions and sentimentalities, and can enjoy the varying moods of nature, and the pleasures of poetic pastiche. However capriciously the winds of literary fashion may blow, the countless flock of minor lyricists will always be with us, while the truly great

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will be few and far between. One danger indeed we have little reason to fear. I mean the sterilising tyranny of some dominant lyrical form, such as the Greek elegiac couplet, or the late-classical Chinese stanza. Our poetry is already so abundantly rich in types, and so fertile in breeding new varieties, that neither the spirit of a new Age, nor genius however individual need be at a loss for appropriate forms of lyrical self-expression. A twentieth-century Catullus or Heine would have no cause for complaint if he were to be born an Englishman.

It is with regard to lyrics on a larger, more elaborate scale, that English poets have hitherto shown least ambition and enterprise. The Pindarics of Gray are a poor substitute for Pindar; while the *Odes* of Keats and Matthew Arnold's *Thyrsis* and *Scholar-Gipsy* are elegiac rather than lyrical in mood and form. Shelley and Goethe, and at times Swinburne, have shown them-

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selves to be more truly the successors of the greater Greek lyric poets ; and if they be rightly understood, their example may yet bear fruit for our delight of altogether unimaginable quality. But the tendency of the moment seems to be towards poems on a small scale, of a somewhat anæmic delicacy, or else of an artful and piquant quaintness, rather than towards the sustained movement, and elaborate yet highly organised form, which is necessary for the greatest lyrical poetry.

Another province of literature, which we have seldom as yet attempted to make our own, is that of comic poetry. We have indeed had many and various comic writers of first-rate quality ; but although, when they were so minded, Chaucer and Shakespeare and Byron could show themselves to be masters of comedy in verse, we have as yet had no Aristophanes, but have been obliged to content ourselves with the charming trivialities and vulgarities of

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a Gilbert. If only Ben Jonson, in addition to stage-craft, Gargantuan comic energy and Titanic eloquence, had been gifted with a particle of that fiery celestial ether, by which alone mortal art can become divine, then indeed perhaps . . . But of what use are regrets? The future, not the past, is here our concern. And what a future might there not be for the comic genius who should be so fortunately inspired as to take the popular Farce, or even the theatrical Revue, and by giving it the life and the wings of poetry, so transform it from a poor ephemeral stage-hobby-horse into an immortal cloud-cruising Pegasus, or at least a serviceable Hippogryph! Thus sublimely mounted, what regions of the earth and sky might not such a Bellerophon explore? What monsters and Chimæras might he not torment and slay with the shafts of his lyrical ridicule? All that men and women say or think or do, would lie ready as

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fuel for his imagination to kindle at will, all our follies and fashions, vices and virtues, stupidities, cruelties, noble extravagances, religious and metaphysical dreams. If Socrates could afford to be a good-naturedly amused spectator of the *Clouds*, so might Freud of some *Comedy of Dreams* by our modern Aristophanes : and if he could not, why, so much the worse for him and his speculations. How wholesome too for our prominent statesmen and demagogues !—But alas, I am forgetting our Lord Chamberlain. We are not yet sufficiently enlightened to tolerate political caricature and Rabelaisian ribaldry upon our stage, and an English *Knights* or *Lysistrata* must remain, I fear, for the present a poet's dream. Nevertheless, under a reasonably intelligent censorship, what Rabelais was for his age, an emancipated imaginative comedy might well be for our own, except that, whereas the Gallic genius has always expressed itself

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most naturally and completely in prose, ours would expand more congenially into poetry, which, for all its apparent limitations, should be, at its best, the more universal interpreter of the spirit of man, whether on the plane of tragedy or of comedy.

There is good reason for hoping that the problem of an adequate stage-performance of imaginative comedy would be less difficult to solve than it seems to be in the case of serious poetic drama. Actors are always more ready to understand and do justice to plays that are good fun as well as good literature. Mr. Bernard Shaw and Gilbert and Sullivan are apt to meet with better treatment at the hands of our producers and performers than Ibsen or Wagner. All the same even poetic tragedy should not be too lightly despaired of. If great plays can be written, someone sooner or later is likely to have the ambition and the intelligence to produce them worthily. Something of the kind

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seems to have happened at Glasgow, in the case of Mr. Gordon Bottomley's verse plays. Let us hope, however cautiously, that what Scotland does to-day, England may at least begin to think of doing to-morrow. Meantime there is one wholesome lesson that poets may learn from the undoubted literary success of Mr. Bottomley's *Gruach* and *Lear's Wife*. It is continually being dinned into their ears by critics who should know better, that the time is now gone by when poets might borrow their material from a remote or legendary past; that a twentieth-century dramatist must deal only in twentieth-century themes if he hopes to reach the hearts of twentieth-century men and women, or to win the good graces of Georgian reviewers. And yet it is unquestionably true that in every period when poetic tragedy has flourished, mythical, legendary and historical subjects have been the rule, and contemporary themes the rare exceptions.

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Oedipus, Agamemnon and Pentheus were not fifth-century Athenians any more than Hamlet, Lear and Antony were Elizabethans, or Andromaque and Phèdre *Parisiennes* of the *grand siècle*. The artistic success of the *Persae*, *Othello* and *Bajazet* merely make this determined preference for archaic subject-matter seem the more remarkable. And yet none of these writers were mere literary antiquarians, but true children of their own age, to whose dramas we now look first, if we wish to understand the mentality and the moral standards of the populace that applauded them. Even Goethe, in the work that perhaps more than any other represents the complexity of modern ideas and aspirations, went back to a myth that was then two hundred years old. It would seem as though the poetic imagination, when it sets itself the most arduous of its tasks, that of alembicating tragic beauty from human misery and passion, welcomes the limita-

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tion of choice, the simplicity of atmosphere, the freedom from distracting contemporary preoccupations, which a remote theme brings with it. None the less Ibsen's *Brandt* and *Peer Gynt* show how a modern, though scarcely a familiar world, may be made the background of true poetic tragedy; although in *Peer Gynt* the almost continued presence of the Comedic Muse, with her incurable modernity, tempers the difficulty of the problem. Thus, though it would be unreasonable to maintain that the Tragic Muse must be unable to live and breathe in the smoky atmosphere of our present-day world, it would be still more absurd to prohibit her escape into the purer clime of a legendary or historical past.

The case of narrative poetry is somewhat similar, yet with important differences. It is true that the Homeric heroes and the society in which they lived had long ceased to exist when the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed,

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and that most of the great epic and narrative writers, Virgil, Ariosto, Milton and Marlowe, preferred mythical or purely fantastic settings for their stories. Yet such a limitation would seem to be hardly so natural to narrative as to tragic poetry. For the quality of narrative being less intense and passionate, and its unity more loose, it is able to indulge copiously in decoration, description and digression, and so should be able to deal all the more effectively with the variegated modern scene. And yet, except for two sombre short stories in blank verse by Wordsworth, and Byron's *Don Juan*, there has scarcely been any narrative, dealing with modern life and of first-rate poetical quality, since Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. This is perhaps because poets have not sufficiently realised that the telling of a story in verse instead of prose can only be justified when the sensuous and decorative beauty of the medium is continually maintained at the highest

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pitch. For whereas in the intense and tragic moments of drama exquisiteness and richness of texture may be unnecessary, or at times even a positive nuisance, bald and graceless verse narrative is always insupportable. Byron indeed atoned for much artistic unscrupulousness and slovenly workmanship by his unfailing energy and wit. But poets will have to take to heart the lesson of Chaucer's scrupulous attention to beauty of texture, if they are to hold their own in rivalry with prose fiction. They will have also to be aware of the dangers of a too exclusive interest in analytical psychology. Narrative, when it ceases to narrate, very easily becomes a bore. Such writers as Proust and Henry James may have been able successfully to dispense with many of the functions of story-telling, by laboriously evolving a peculiar prose instrument of their own for the expression of psychological subtleties. But it is doubtful whether

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anything of the kind would be possible in verse, or, if possible, whether it would be readable. Yet for the direct presentation, serious or humoristic, of character, mood and emotion, verse in the hands of a master will always remain an instrument of supreme power.

There are certain other kinds of poetry, more or less akin to narrative, for which an interesting future may be predicted. The Victorians seem to have had a special predilection for the Dramatic Monologue, perhaps because they unconsciously felt their inability to cope with the problems of drama. *Caliban upon Setebos* and *The Bishop orders his Tomb in St. Praxed's Church* are notable successes; but several of Browning's experiments should be a warning of the danger of lengthiness and over-elaboration in a form that allows of very little narrative interest or dramatic contrast. Great and sustained beauty of language can alone

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justify a long poem of such a kind ; and it is just in this respect that Browning was most deficient.

Another attractive sub-species of narrative poetry is the Dramatic Dialogue or Interlude, which has lately been successfully revived by Mr. Sturge Moore and Mr. Abercrombie. The great master of this form, as also of the Monologue, is Theocritus, whose *Syracusan Women*, *Kyniska*, *Thyrsis*, and *Simaitha* will always remain as a challenging inspiration to succeeding ages. The great range of his material within the narrow limits of his surviving work, and his marvellous blend of naturalism and poetry, should be peculiarly suggestive to a generation like our own, with its eagerness to find new paths, or rediscover old ones, to poetic freedom.

It would be presumptuous in one who is not himself a philosopher to speak with assurance about philosophic poetry : yet I shall venture upon some

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obvious reflections. Few would dispute that there has been only one specifically philosophical work which is also a great poem, the *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius. But those of us who love it best will, if we are candid, admit that it contains vast tracts of scientific and metaphysical discussion, which even fervid and eloquent genius has not wholly succeeded in clothing with the vesture of poetry. It is true that, for those few who have the courage and wisdom to read them, these sections should have a very high value as parts of a sublime imaginative vision of the universe ; and they also contain many scattered episodes of divine poetic loveliness. But the claim of Lucretius to rank among the world's greatest writers will always rest upon those sections, such as the endings of his third, fourth and fifth books, where the material is already in its essence poetic, and gives scope to his supreme gift for sensuous description, or for passionate

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ethical discourse. It is to be feared that if a poet of equal genius with Lucretius were to take modern psychology, the physics of Einstein, or the philosophy of Mr. Russell as his subject-matter, with the intention of seriously expounding and not of merely poetising them, he would be unable to avoid similar desert tracts of unpoetical reasoning. But it is a narrow view which can deny that verse should ever be employed, unless the result be poetry. If an artist in language is able to set forth philosophic matter that is of great intrinsic interest more luminously and attractively in verse than could be done in prose (which is precisely what Lucretius did with the crabbed sentences of Epicurus), let us not grudge him the praise and gratitude that are his due. However, it seems unlikely that scientific philosophy will ever again inspire an expository treatise such as the *De Rerum Natura*. It might indeed enter as an all-pervading

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influence into some comprehensive epic design, just as religion and scholastic philosophy pervade the *Divina Commedia*. What is certain is that, as there have always been, so there always will be philosophically minded poets, and that they will discover for themselves what forms serve their purpose best.

The treatise, as a poetic form, would seem to be more suitable for subjects that are neither strictly philosophic, nor scientific. Yet though we have had our *Seasons*, *Night Thoughts*, and *Sofas* in plenty, Virgil's *Georgics* remain still unrivalled. Why should not an ingenious and erudite poet take some such pregnant subject as Architecture, the Garden, or the Evolution of Religion, or if he have the knowledge and the boldness, Machinery, Medicine or Economics, and dispute Virgil's supremacy in this field, as Virgil once did Hesiod's? How fascinating would he not find the problem of wedding

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didactic and historical exposition to perfect loveliness of texture? What opportunities for description and reflection? And with what entrancing episodes, serious or playful, might he not delight our fancy?

Not the least noble, nor the least exacting of mistresses, is the Muse of Satire. "*Facit indignatio versum*," said Juvenal. But alas, how fumbling a designer, how banal a metrician, how unscrupulous and inartistic a poetaster has Indignation generally proved herself to be! Few satires survive the ephemeral social follies that provoked them, because, being by nature parasites, when that which supported their growth decays and perishes, they too must perish, unless indeed they are rooted deeply in the unchanging soil of imagination and poetry. Truly great satire will always be very rare. It is still possible to read with delight Byron's *Vision of Judgment*, and portions of his *Age of Bronze*; and there are passages

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in Pope and Dryden that fully deserve their reputation. But it is perhaps only in parts of the *Divina Commedia*, and in the last three hundred lines of the fourth book of Lucretius, and occasionally in Leopardi, that satire may be found mingled as the dominating element in poetry of the highest order. Its taste even there is bitter, but with the divine bitterness of passion and sincerity.

In the enchanted kingdom of fantasy and the mock-heroic, Pope's *Rape of the Lock* and Lear's poems still reign supreme. It is perhaps because they are ostensibly written for the delight of children, that *The Owl and the Pussy-cat*, *The Dong*, and the *Quangle-Wangle* have never, so far as I know, found their way into serious adult anthologies. Yet if we are really sincere in our quest for lyrical beauty, verbal euphony and metrical invention, we should not have tolerated without protest the absence of these poems from the *Oxford Book*

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of Verse, where they would more than hold their own in the company of *Annabel Lee*, *The Lady of Shalott*, and *The Blessed Damozel*.

CHAPTER V

MISCELLANEOUS

THE main trouble with all attempts at literary classification is that they are bound to exclude many intermediate types. Much of the most memorable English poetry is neither in a strict sense lyrical, nor philosophic, nor anything else than beautiful and shapely verse. No other literature is so rich as ours in quasi-lyrical poetry, such as the sonnets of Shakespeare and Wordsworth, Gray's *Elegy* and Keats' *Odes*. Future writers will doubtless invent other similar forms for their new purposes; but it would be a disastrous error to suppose that, because an art-form has once become classical, it therefore can no longer be used, except

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for academic pastiche. No form is ever superannuated if it be the best possible vehicle for expressing a new artistic idea. A poet need be no more afraid of using the Shakespearian or Petrarchian sonnet, than a musician need be ashamed of composing a classical fugue, provided his inspiration be genuine ; and its genuineness will not be obscured or destroyed by being cast into some old and well-tried mould. Indeed the most truly academic works are often those in which some ephemerally fashionable formula has been blindly adopted without being understood. The mental habits of poets are as various as those of scientists or politicians. Wordsworth, who far more than most poets drew his material from his own experience, was nevertheless inspired to invent his most felicitous work by such traditional forms as the sonnet or the common ballad stanza : his *Ode to Duty* is exactly modelled on a metrical invention of Gray, and the pattern of

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his *Leech-Gatherer*, but for one slight variation, is the same as that of Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece*. On the other hand Walt Whitman spent many years laboriously floundering in search of a poetic method, and it was only late in life that his unconscious sense of form led him to write a few poems that are as perfect in design and as moving as any fragment of Alcman.

In every fertile and creative age of literature, it will generally be found that there were two main stimulating influences at work: in the first place naturalism, or an awakened sensitiveness to the suggestive beauty of the actual world; and secondly the fascination exercised by the masterpieces of earlier periods and alien cultures. By this I do not mean the direct inheritance of a poetic medium. Milton no doubt learnt his metrical technique from Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, but in everything else he owed far more to his loving study of Homer, Euripides,

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Virgil and the Bible. Thus too the spiritual presence of Homer is felt everywhere in the Greek lyrical and dramatic writers, and even in Theocritus; and thus emulous idolatry of Greek and Alexandrine masterpieces quickened into life all that was best in Latin poetry; while Virgil and Ovid in their turn became the schoolmasters of Dante and the Renaissance. The tyranny of Latin over English poetry only began to wane towards the end of the eighteenth century; then suddenly in Shelley and Keats, and later in Matthew Arnold, Swinburne, Mr. Bridges, and even Browning, the Hellenic spirit becomes a veritable Castalian fountain of inspiration. Now that the knowledge of Greek is likely to become a rare accomplishment, it is possible that its influence will die away as quickly as it flowered. Yet the imagination is sometimes kindled by translations even more potently than by scholarship, as is shown by the case

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of Keats, who had small Latin and less Greek. And indeed, apart from our ever-growing interest in our own earlier literature, the most helpful and fertile impulse seems likely in the near future to come through translations of Oriental poetry, such as those by Mr. Waley and Mr. Nicholson. But from whatever direction the wind may blow, it will be the most imaginative artists who will first be sensitive to it, and the most skilful and discreet in the use they put it to. The lesser crowd will, as ever, follow their lead, until what was once a renovating breath of inspiration has become a stale and flatulent academicism.

Even if it be true, as I have suggested earlier in this essay, that poetry has ceased to be a great popular and social art, there will be no need to regret the change in so far as it may make it more easy for poets to disregard fashionable success, and so to retain their artistic integrity. Yet there are certain

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dangers to which they will become increasingly liable. An art which presupposes a select initiated audience, very quickly becomes over-precious, and, for all its refinement, essentially parochial. The best art will take nothing for granted in those to whom it is addressed, except artistic intelligence and that human nature which is common to us all. Poets whose idiom is not universal, but calculated for a cultured private coterie, write with the risk of swift oblivion, so soon as the tide of æsthetic caprice has turned. This is all the more regrettable, as such poetry is sometimes of great originality and beauty. The most frequent fault is obscurity, due either to an Alexandrine love of recondite allusions, or more often to an apparently studied neglect of transitions. A contempt for clarity has almost come to be regarded as an artistic virtue, rather than as a vice, or at best an occasionally inevitable evil. Nothing in truth can be more funda-

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mentally inartistic than needless obscurity. Poetry that is intellectually and emotionally complex, is certain in any case to be difficult enough; and the less a reader is called upon to make avoidable mental effort, the more convincingly will the essential context of a poem be communicated to his mind. The medium of poetry consists not merely of words, but of speech, that is of words, phrases and sentences in syntactic and logical relations to one another; and although these relations necessarily tend to be more emotional and less rational in poetry than in prose, because poetry is the more emotional medium, yet there are limits which it is dangerous to exceed. Much no doubt depends upon the nature of the subject matter. A chorus of Aeschylus, or a soliloquy of Macbeth may be very difficult to analyse and construe satisfactorily; yet their general drift is usually clear enough. Cloudy vagueness or intricate subtlety may well be

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necessary and legitimate qualities of a poem ; but all superfluous obscurity is æsthetically pure waste. Gerard Hopkins is a deplorable example of a poet of sincerity and genius, who damaged much of his best work by not being sufficiently aware of the nature of his instrument, which was the English language, or of his audience, who could only be educated English-speaking people. The admirers of such writers will often quite honestly deny that they find them unduly difficult. They probably forget how hard they have had to work in order to obtain their reward. The trouble is that the poet ought to have done the larger part of their work for them himself.

Whatever may be the destinies of English poetry, I do not think it is likely to achieve anything very remarkable until we have grown out of a doctrine or prejudice that is widely prevalent just now, that is to say our dislike and suspicion of rhetoric. By

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rhetoric I mean the sum of all the artifices and habits of syntax, phrasing and diction which are necessary in order to sustain the movement and the structure of a poem that is designed on a large scale, or of a short poem of great emotional intensity. That may be a loose and unsatisfactory definition, but it is the best I can come by. Criticism nowadays seems to be mainly interested in lyrical poetry on a small scale ; and this may account for the disfavour into which the very name of rhetoric has fallen : for it is true that short lyrics of a certain kind can afford to dispense with rhetoric, in the sense in which I am using the word. Yet if the European poets of the past, and their public, had been as shy of rhetoric as we are at present, it is certain that there would have been no Homer to begin with, still less an Aeschylus, a Milton, a Racine, or a Shelley. We might have produced poetry of exquisite charm and refinement, but its imagina-

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tive range and vitality would probably have been as restricted as that of the Japanese, or of the later Chinese poets. If we compare in Mr. Waley's translations the classical Tang poets with those earlier primitive writers, who were not yet afraid of composing on a fairly large scale, we shall then see what may be the fate of a literature that has grown ashamed of employing the breadth and energy of movement without which great poetry is impossible. Of course there has always been, and always will be, bad rhetoric, as well as good. The inferior imitators of Milton, for instance, used to impose upon their own commonplace poetic conceptions the whole stylistic apparatus which Milton had elaborated for the purpose of sustaining the enormous movement of his verse, and enriching its texture. Bad rhetoric is always stale rhetoric. "No bird," as Blake says, "soars too high, if he soars with his own wings."

But it is an ill wind that blows no-

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body any good ; and we may gratefully welcome this impatience of rhetoric, in so far as it serves to purify the air of that pestilential blight which is known as "poetic," but would be more truthfully named "prosaic diction." To quote Mr. Santayana, "when use has worn down a poetic phrase to its external import, and rendered it an indifferent symbol for a particular thing, that phrase has become prosaic. It has also become, by the same process, transparent and purely instrumental." Poetry, when it is healthy and vigorous, is continually discarding such worn-out words and phrases, as being indeed no longer poetical enough for its purposes. It is the simpler, homelier words and idioms of everyday speech that carry with them most poetic suggestion. Not but what rare and far-fetched diction may not on fit occasions be ornamentally useful, or justify itself by its grandeur and impressiveness. Shakespeare knew his business when he wrote,

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“ The multitudinous seas incarnadine ” ;
but how thankful we should have been
if succeeding poets had had the wisdom
to refrain from debasing his coinage !
Poetry need not be always simple,
sensuous or passionate ; but when it
wishes to be decorative or extravagant,
it will do well to remember the fable of
the jay in peacock’s feathers, and grow
novel and appropriate plumage of its
own.

With regard to poetic inversion, there
is bound to be great divergence both
in practice and in critical taste. Swin-
burne considered Ben Jonson’s line,
“ But might I of Jove’s nectar sup,”
to be an inexcusable blemish in an
otherwise perfect masterpiece. Yet
Jacobean readers would probably have
found the order of the words sufficiently
natural and unforced. It is true that
since then there has been a considerable
change in our linguistic sense, due in
part to the long dominance of prose
during the eighteenth century, and in

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part to the waning influence of Latin. Nevertheless even now the best writers in their most genuinely poetic moments still assert for themselves, though within narrower limits, the licence of modifying the strict grammatical order. This surely is as it ought to be ; for though a language like ours, which has shed most of its inflections, is compelled to have a more rigid word-order than an inflected language like Latin, yet emotional stress and the need for rhetorical emphasis will always, even in prose, tempt writers to violate the conventional rules, and still more in poetry, where the position of words and phrases in relation to the line is of such paramount importance.

CHAPTER VI

THE CHILDREN OF THAMYRIS

THERE is another legend concerning the ancient Hellenic Muses, which I would here like to recall. It is said that one of their most gifted and distinguished pupils, the Thessalian bard Thamyris, having made certain innovations in the orthodox technique of poetry, and having moreover enlarged its boundaries by annexing subject-matter that had hitherto been considered beneath the dignity of classic art, one day had the audacity to challenge his august schoolmistresses to a contest of song. Apollo was the umpire, and he, as might have been expected, adjudged the victory to his divine relatives. The presumptuous mortal was condemned to lose his eyes, and forbidden hence-

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forth to practise the sacred art of poesy. The baser medium of prose would be good enough for such renegade impostors. But the result was far different from what the Goddesses had expected. Thamyris, though blinded, remained recalcitrant, and retaining all his former skill and genius, like his remote descendants, blind Maeonides and Milton, continued to produce masterpiece after masterpiece. Worse still, he became a popular hero among the miserable mortal multitude, who naturally sided with the victim of divine jealousy. Moreover Thamyris soon afterwards became the father of a numerous family, and their descendants, multiplying throughout the world, inherited, not his blindness, but his poetical gifts. Thus it comes about that all true poets and lovers of poetry are children of Thamyris, and little though they know it, have each some few drops of his inspired and rebellious blood running in their veins. If the

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Muses had wished effectively to stamp out heresy, they would have been wiser had they followed the example of Apollo, who flayed alive that other æsthetic mutineer, Marsyas, thus robbing him not only of life, but of the hope of heretical offspring.

Now it appears to me that this tale must have been a prophetic fable, intended to symbolise certain important aspects of man's poetic evolution. If the Muses and Apollo represent the established, conservative tradition of poetry, then in Thamyris must be embodied the perennial revolt of the creative younger generation against the prestige and authority of the past. Though the penalty of rebellion may sometimes be blindness, egoism and eccentricity, yet the sacred fire will remain alive in the heart of the rebel, and will be handed down by him to his posterity, who, themselves neither blind nor mutinous, will often become in turn the persecutors of their own

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children. Thus the divine flame will never cease to burn, and generation after generation the youth of poetry will be renewed.

Nevertheless there are those who take a gloomier view of man's destinies. Poetry, they tell us, like mythology, religion and metaphysics, is a primitive and puerile function of the human mind. It is already becoming superseded by less rudimentary, more rational means of self-expression. We are entering upon an era of science and prose, and may as well at once frankly put away poetry, along with other childish things. At the beginning of this essay I have tried to suggest how much and how little truth there may be in this view. I have admitted that the dissociation of poetry from music and intonation has to a great extent diminished the immediate potency of its sensuous and emotional appeal; but I have argued that the new medium of spoken verse, although it may have

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grown more similar to prose, is yet very far from being identical with it, either formally, or in the nature of its subject-matter. Prose is the more transparent, self-effacing instrument. Its value consists not so much in itself (though it may possess a real sensuous charm and beauty of its own), but rather in its intellectual content and the knowledge it conveys. But the value of poetry resides primarily in the medium itself. If that be not beautiful, then verse is a thing of naught, and worse than naught. None the less poetry should be no mere meaningless verbal incantation, nor yet a melodious transmitter of congenial lies and irresponsible reverie. It is a means of discourse, of which the content should be neither science nor history nor speculation in their abstract purity, but all these and much else besides, enveloped and humanised by emotion, and presented with all the moving pathos and beauty which is inherent in them, but which the less imaginative

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prosaic medium cannot so effectually reveal. So long as human nature remains what it is now, as in spite of cynical prognostications it is likely to do for some time to come, it will both demand and obtain satisfaction for its ideal needs from literature, as well as from the musical and plastic arts : and in fact, if verse were to be proscribed or abandoned by general consent, we should be soon compelled to find an awkward substitute for it in rhythmical or poetic prose. Yet, in spite of the beauty and grandeur of our translations of biblical Hebrew verse, and of certain majestic passages in such writers as Sir Thomas Browne, rhythmical prose has seldom proved itself able to compete with formal poetry. It is too primitive, too monotonous and cumbersome to perform more than a small part of the various functions of modern spoken verse, to which we should inevitably be driven before long to revert.

CHILDREN OF THAMYRIS

Yet though the disappearance of poetry is unlikely, and would be a real disaster, it is much to be desired that poetry should become more rational and responsible, more intelligently aware of the best interests and ideals of its most civilised contemporaries. It would be childish and unwise for poets to disregard the fact that our habits of mind are growing continually more scientific. The function of the imagination is to interpret and illuminate reality, and it cannot therefore neglect or despise the normal aspects under which reality presents itself to the human mind. But it must also appeal to the human heart ; and since the passions and dreams of the heart are less mutable than the intellect, it is in this respect that the nature of poetry is least likely to suffer any fundamental change. The garment in which it clothes itself will alter, as language alters, and as poets of genius are moved to enlarge or contract it. As long as men use articulate speech,

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some few among them will take delight in moulding it into rhythmical forms of harmonious beauty, in order to find the most perfect expression for the intimate desires and movements of the soul.

Perhaps I should have been more prudent if I had confined my discussion to the more purely technical aspects of poetry, without venturing upon the dangerous sea of general reflections upon style and theme, attitude and tendency. I have at least tried to refrain from dogma and prophecy, and attempted rather to suggest future possibilities by drawing attention to the lessons which we can still learn from the past. It may well be that the only really profitable discussions about poetry are technical discussions. "The thought of man is not triable. Even the Devil knoweth not the thought of man," said the old legal maxim. And so, to my mind, the thought, the soul of the Muse of modern poetry is not triable, nor

CHILDREN OF THAMYRIS

discussable ; but her actions are. And what else are her actions but her successes and failures in exploiting her medium? Although her golden age may seem to lie in the past, and her future be uncertain and beset with perils, yet there is no need to despair of her salvation. To revert to the apologue with which I began, though I may feel some sympathy with the celestial point of view, I am not really on the side of the angels.

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